

## A Treatment of the Concordant Opposition

### A Paragonal Pondering

<Disclaimer>

Technically speaking, this short story is an *instance* of a Prolog to a role-play gaming *module*. As an author of modules, one does not write complete stories. Rather, one leaves open key elements of the underlying plot for a group module consumers, called *players*, to fill with their actions. The story is not actually written until the final implications of the last player's action are known.

As such, a well-written module would be mother to a thousand stories, and one could further subdivide a story according to each player's unique perspective. In a long *campaign*, which is a linkage of many modules, these perspectives can vary widely, and become themselves Another Story. Such is only possible in the five-dimensional reality of the role-play environment, where the plot depends on free will. An instance of a module is the combined perspective of all players of the module, each a chapter in the underlying *story*.

A simple example of a module is any video game. One is offered a limited number of choices within a small context. The more choices one receives, the closer to reality the experience becomes, given a convincing visual environment.

A better example is the humble Mad-Lib. Typically found in the form of a notepad full of silly stories, Mad-Libs contain blanks where key words in the story should be, with an indicator as to the type of word to be used: noun, verb, and so on. The Mad-Lib Master gathers a number of Mad-Libbers together, and calls out the types of words that are required. The Mad-Libbers then provide the words, going around the room in as orderly a fashion as the drinks allow. Finally, the Mad-Lib Master reads aloud the story with the chosen words inserted into the proper places, and the narrative becomes a unique, often hysterical, nonsense story. Combined with a couple of teenagers and bathroom humor, the result is often teary-eyed convulsions.

While modules are much more complex, the idea is essentially the same. The treatment which follows is the introduction to an exceedingly long campaign that probes concepts of a decidedly cosmological nature. The Prolog module gives the players a chance to imagine themselves as deities for a brief moment before they must begin the actual campaign as mortals with virtually nothing.

In total, the player's rules for the Prolog module are as follows:

1. The player must complete the creation of a character for the campaign;
2. The player may then select virtually any greater god to play;
3. The player may not select a deity that will be the target of worship, adoration, binding, or oath-taking by the player's campaign character.

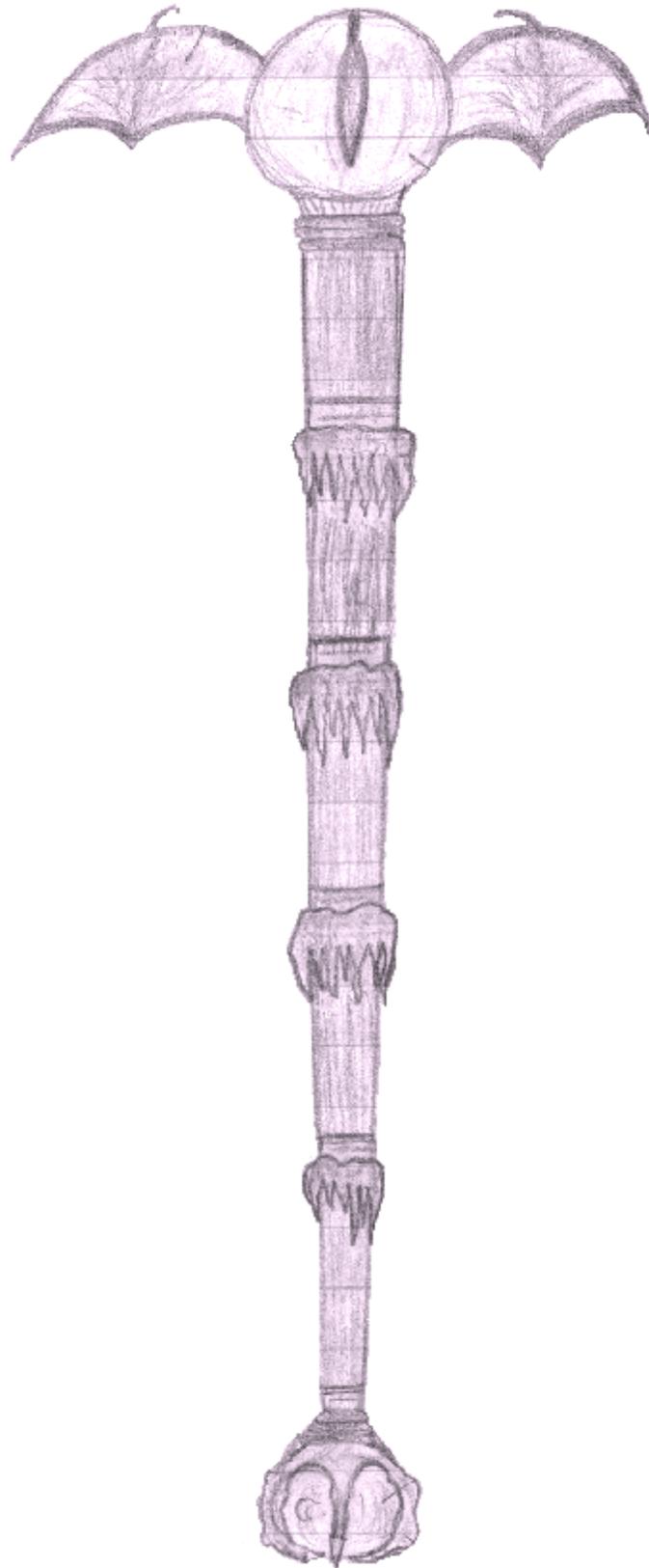
The possibility remains that a player could select another player's deity unbeknownst. For reasons of Future Flavor, one attempts to steer the players in this direction during the creation of the campaign character, but one is not always successful. Heedless, it remains a pot begging to be stirred.

Being greater gods, the players cannot be made to reasonably suffer any other rules. Luckily, their destination balances this out quite handily. It should be noted that all of the characters appearing in this treatment are actual avatars that have been played for decades, and still remain active. The tournament from which they arose continues to this day.

Finally, any module worth its mettle must satisfy the first principle of role-play gaming: if it's not fun, then it doesn't work. In this style of play, one is free to define "fun" for one's self on a moment-to-moment basis.

It is in this spirit the following farce unfolds.

</Disclaimer>



<KAOS>

*Those goddamned Divas!*

Ziegfried of KAOS was not given to submit to orders. As he scratched madly at odd parts of himself, he felt the Diva staring at him, even though it did not have eyes, or a face, or much of anything other than a pillar of white shimmering light, which was not light at all, because the thrice-damned thing was not actually *here*.

"The Committee awaits your response," it said, its robotic voice obscenely sensual.

"Bah," scoffed the Old Man. "This is KAOS! We do not shimmer here!" Ziegfried was decrepit beyond his years. He possessed a frothy commemorative bottomless pewter stein bearing his namesake, and a bitter Turkish cigarette that always stayed lit. They both annoyed him deeply because he did not drink or smoke. Juggling his various vices, he pulled out a pair of tri-spectacled-bi-dimensional-focals, and read the Invitation again:

**ADMIT ONE**  
***Herr Ziegfried of KAOS***  
**(dba Kill All Old Soothsayers)**  
***Of No Particular Realm***

*No particular realm?* Ziegfried tried not to look offended. He failed miserably; Divas perceived everything.

**You Are Hereby Invited To:**  
The 423rd Quasi-aeonal Conjunction of  
8,456 Prime Material Instances featuring  
22,937 Dream-Scapes and Phantasms containing  
144,000 Addle-Pated Rapturites Transgressing --

It went on in this sort of maddening fashion for some time. At the end (*finally*):

**A Tournament of Aspects**  
*To Be Conducted by the Divas*  
*by the Shores of the Sea of Ideas.*

**Aspect Chamber: Tanelorn (10,7,2,9, 8,4/5,4)**

***Let your Diva be your Guide.***

It was a little-known secret among mortals that even the most powerful of deities, at some point in their *August* careers, meet with the forces of Ascension, that magical moment in which mortality is shed, and the new god emerges. The hubris of the immediate post-Ascension mania eventually brings all new godlings to the Concordant Opposition, mainly because they can. They ignore the advice of the other Titans, L-Rons, and Yawehs not to meddle with forces even gods cannot control. And the most Wise and Long-Lived among the Truly Ancient Ones, in all his/her/its/their eons of existence, has never since returned.

For it is the only place gods will perish.

"Omnipotence," Ziegfried fumed to the pillar of light, "is overrated." His own greatness had cursed him with the helplessness and resignation of severe old age. His black leather dress uniform no longer fit him properly, as his frame had shriveled, and it cost him dearly to perform the simplest tasks. Moving toward the Opposition could only invite trouble. He briefly thought of turning down the invitation. His itching intensified.

"The Committee is not responsible for actions of the Membership in your absence," the Diva explained patiently, plainly reading what passed for the Elder God's thoughts.

The Divas emanate from the Concordant Opposition. At its center lies a perfect union of the surest truth and worst lie, and this force extends some distance out, a field devoid of the conflict upon which a deity feeds. Without opposition, worshippers simmer down, go astray, and the god is reduced. In the Sea of Ideas, this melting is complete. Virtually all manifestations of Ziegfried shuddered at the thought.

"Yes, yes, yes," *Herr* Ziegfried rumbled, gathering himself, "but what is the point? We will not be seen gallivanting around *die Hölle* -- "

"Ring of Aspects," the Diva corrected, interrupting.

"Whatever you call it, we will not be going." He grew another arm for the express purpose of scratching his red-rough hide.

"The Committee holds the rod-bearer," intoned the Diva.

"You are welcome to drop 'prince' Lafrom into the singularity!" Ziegfried cursed.

"We will. He bears your Talisman." The Diva was clearly triumphant.

Ever since Ernst Klink was wheeled into his life, Ziegfried's devotees had grown exponentially from one to seven, and then five, and now down to four, miserable mortals, all. Where the crippled Klink had been his high priest, "prince" Lafrom acted as Ziegfried's personal avatar, the god's mortal presence on earth. In an effort to amass more worshippers, Ziegfried had gambled on an ancient artifact about which he knew next to nothing. "Ahnkmog" was its name in the local vernacular, and "prince" Lafrom had assembled it (with not a little meddling) out of the deeps of time. When the last piece clicked into place, Ziegfried became a greater god.

That is when the headaches began. And the vomiting. And the rash. No woe compares to the ill temper of an immortal Prussian with prickly heat. Another ugly truth about deification is the Talisman, that device by which Ascension occurs and through which deific power is maintained. The best ones take shifting forms, never to be discovered. Any Talisman that can be taken to the Concordant Opposition would be considered, by all accounts, a complete failure.

Unknown to Ziegfried, Ahnkmog's original owner had been defeated, having taken his own life. It manifested as a rod of rulership broken into seven pieces and scattered in time and space and whatnot. Ziegfried, without a Talisman himself, sought to leech its power through "prince" Lafrom and Ernst Klink. Ahnkmog had other ideas, as it was accursed, and all of its former Keepers were corrupt. Upon final assembly, it named itself Boggnash, which translates in Prussian as "*Ach, Scheisse!*" and became master of its own accord, with one condition. So long as "prince" Lafrom worshiped KAOS, Ahnkmog stayed together. Should the rod ever come apart...

"The Committee awaits your response." The Diva seemed to have eternal patience.

"We will go," Ziegfried acquiesced grumpily. "But we will not be staying the night!"

"No, you will not."

*Those goddamned agreeable Divas!*

</KAOS>

<Tanelorn>

It was not until Ziegfried and his guide had arrived at the Divan gate-world that he remembered he was, after all, still a greater god, and he simply willed a vial of aloe Vera extract into existence to sooth his burning itch. That it did not occur to him to just heal himself did not bode well for what was to come.

One did not simply waltz into the Concordant Opposition. Often called the Center of the Multiverse, the Opposition was rife with paradox and contradiction. Chief among these concerns was the actual location of this alleged center, which, as any Diva would happily report if asked, occurred "not long after the End of Time."

Hardly helpful, but was nevertheless factual. The Divas kept no secrets about themselves and their environs. Their realm was a long-dead prime material plane, hundreds of trillions of years old. All its stars had long ago dissipated into gas, only to be gobbled up by increasingly larger (and fewer) singularities, until only one large point-mass remained. After unspeakably empty cavities of time, the rotation of the remaining mass of a dead universe slowed ever so slowly, and finally, came to a stop.

It is said the first Diva arose on that day.

Ziegfried rubbed his head. The aloe Vera was doing nothing for his growing sense of dread. He had no sooner arrived in the city of Tanelorn than he collided violently with a rather rotund priest. They tangled without grace, staff and stein, foot and other foot, spilling across the gate plaza in a most undignified fashion. The Diva twinkled, and Ziegfried was certain it was mocking him.

"Sorry, Old Jeeves," said the priest, scuttling to his feet with surprising agility. "I'm late for a tourney, as they say in these parts. Are you hungry? Can I fix you something to eat?" The fat cleric picked up a thin ivory staff with a curious black and white arrow mounted horizontally on the tip. It pointed rather pointedly at Ziegfried.

"We really do not think we can spare the time -- " tried Ziegfried unsuccessfully.

"Nonsense. We'll need the fortification where we're going." After a few quick claps, the priest produced a large banquet table laden with meats, fruits, breads, and cheeses, along with steaming trays of rich puddings, casseroles, and hot dishes. Crowded among the plates and platters were flagons of ale, small kegs of spiced wine, and flasks brimming with strong brown liquor. The Diva took a drum of turkey, three Swedish meatballs, and some of that fruit salad with the little

marshmallows. Ziegfried was sure he was going to be sick. With any luck, he'd hit the Diva.

"Fr. Nelomar, at your Service. Seems we're invited to the same A.C." By this point, Fr. Nelomar had sampled a bit of everything, and was now ready to narrow down his choices.

"The odds of that are --" sputtered Ziegfried.

"Yes, yes, it's 31,815,709,200,000 to one. And yet, we're both going to Tanelorn(10,7,2,9,8,4/5,4) now aren't we?" Nelomar helped himself to a third helping of everything. The Diva was digging deep into the English trifle.

Ziegfried was stunned. He stared at the priest anew, his eyes narrowing with recognition. "Why, you are that meddling *dumkopf* that cost 'prince' Lafrom his chance at Ascension!"

"But, of course!" agreed Nelomar merrily. "Howdya think we got the same A.C.?"

"Aspect chambers are not assigned by chance," reminded the Diva. It had made a complete pig of itself.

Ziegfried sampled some fruit. It tasted of sawdust. The meat smelled rancid, and the ale was clearly petroleum. He would sooner eat his Turkish cigarette.

"Ah," sighed Nelomar. "don't keep the Kosher, then, do you? Well, suit yourself, it's a free Multiverse!" Another series of claps, and the great feast was gone as though it had never been. "Shall we go, then?"

"The Membership is decided," agreed the Diva. It seemed to be searching for something.

"See here, we do not much appreciate being assaulted by the likes of --" began Ziegfried.

"Pish-tosh!" declared the priest. "You know the rules. We would not have met if we were not going together. It was your own curse that caused the stumble. Whaddya, new?"

Actually, Ziegfried *was* new. A mere 40 years ago, he was simply a character in an old television show, an unlikely comedic serial villain who had some memorable lines, but could never overcome his nemesis. In this state, his constituency was benign, and faded after his show went off the air. Some years later, a small group of corporeal beings began to pervert his image, rendering

him anew, and elevating him beyond his power to godhood. Being an idea, his complaints went unheard.

And then came "prince" Lafrom...

By now, the Diva had found a strange contraption nearby. It consisted of a levitating glass bottle with two comfortable chairs suspended opposite one another in a simple carriage such that the seats always remained upright regardless of which way the mouth of the bottle was pointed. The Diva had already entered the bottle, and Nelomar was attempting to persuade his immense bulk into a space not designed to accommodate him. A few portable holes later the flab was stored and secured.

The Old God, cursed with dotage, gathered himself, and mounted the alien machine. The Diva glowed briefly brighter, tilted the bottle backwards, and the carriage began to move silently, deeper into the City of Eternal Peace.

</Tanelorn>

- Part 3 -

<Loremeister>

On the subject of Weights and Measures, the following are held to be equivalent:

1 au = 1 Astronomical Unit = 1 Earth-Sun radius

1 au = 93 million miles

1 ly = 1 Light Year

1 ly = 63,240 au

</Loremeister>

<Descension Tower>

Tanelorn was many things to many people, and though its purpose and description changed from frame to frame, one attribute stayed with the City of Eternal Peace throughout the Multiverse: unattainability. Only in the rays of a Divan sun did Tanelorn manifest its true destiny. There were eight other worlds like Tanelorn, each parked near a tiny, manufactured star. The nine suns were arranged in a ring such that each sun was 5ly from its nearest neighbor along the arc. Inward hung the Concordant Opposition. Outward was utter emptiness for thousands of trillions of light years in all directions, and in all frames of reference. Each of the nine worlds served as portal platforms for arriving and departing tournament participants, as gate travel was not possible further inward due to ghastly tidal forces.

As the Divan carriage moved through the bizarre streets, Ziegfried found he could not appreciate the alien architecture that resembled child's candy; the yellow, orange, and blue glowing grasses; nor the thousands of different sentient creatures of a hundred races, all milling about their terribly important business. His stomach flipped over with every sharp turn, and he was certain Death itself was around the very next corner.

"Don't you find it a bit ironic that a god of chaos would come to a tourney through Tanelorn?" Nelomar seemed earnest.

"It is pronounced 'KAOS', and we do not speculate wildly. In fact, we do not approve in the slightest of whatever mad little dream you have prepared for yourself. We mean to claim what is ours and be off. The more silently we do that, the better." Ziegfried made to close his eyes against the building pressure in his pounding head.

Nelomar pursed his lips, and made a sound not unlike that of tap-dancing pigeons. "Ayuh, I can see the pain is pretty bad. It will fade once we enter the Descension Tower, but until then, let's have a little feely, shall we?"

With that, Fr. Nelomar reached around the glass bottle and grabbed Ziegfried's wrist. The arrow on his staff spun around exactly one time, remaining fixed on the god of KAOS.

"You will take your hand off our person, you miserable, self-indulgent – " And then Ziegfried felt immediately better. The black clouds cloaking his thoughts cleared, and the feeling of dread subsided. He regarded Fr. Nelomar, who was clearly worried, with lessening contempt.

"Here, now, that's better," soothed Nelomar.

"Thank you," the god managed. "It will not pass unremembered. Tell me, *mein Öligpfarrer*, why was Lafrom denied Ascension?"

"Ascension is not granted or denied. It must be either earned or inherited, but not both," interjected the Diva. The glass bottle did not affect its voice.

"Why? Why, you ask?" Nelomar looked thoughtful. "I'm much better at the 'how,' not so good with the 'why.' Lafrom had everything going for him, oh yes. But it was based on a scattering of photons born of a 1960s television show. Whole religions have been founded on less, I grant you. Lafrom had the cart before the horse. Before he could ascend, his deity needed to go before him."

*Herr* Ziegfried of KAOS was taken aback. He was not accustomed to being addressed in such terms as "a scattering of photons." He sensed he could easily crush this obese menace under his immortal heel. He began to appreciate the point the priest was making only to the extent it reestablished his dominant position over "prince" Lafrom. That Ahnkmog business had really worried him.

"As it should be." Ziegfried replied coolly. He found he was beginning to enjoy himself.

"We have arrived," the Diva announced, evacuating the glass bottle.

As they dismounted, Fr. Nelomar looked directly at Ziegfried. "You have advanced far in so short a time, with too many shortcuts for your own good. How you perform at this tourney will hound you for the rest of your days. My only advice to you can be: *Time is an Ocean.*"

"And how is it that a questionable priest with an obvious eating disorder takes such interest our destiny?" Ziegfried's tone was not amused.

"Oh, that. The Ones, of course."

"The Bixenta is correct," agreed the Diva.

"The Ones? Are you deliberately mocking us?" Ziegfried grew menacing.

Unimpressed, Fr. Nelomar said, as though to a child, "The Ones Who Came Before."

"Yes," the Diva said happily. "They Did Come Before. We will now descend."

Ziegfried was alarmed. He had a sinking feeling he had just unintentionally joined a cult. He felt the first wisps of a headache beginning to return. He took a puff from his Turkish cigarette. It was utterly revolting, and caused him a fit of dry coughing.

"Do not touch us again," was all the God of KAOS could manage.

</Descension Tower>

<Gathering Arm>

Ziegfried looked around and saw no sign of a tower. It was a wide circular plaza with a tall black obelisk at its center. A niche about the size of a fist was cut into obelisk near its base on all four sides. At one end of the plaza were two thin white poles between which hung an abstract ironwork in the shape of a large spiral with nine arms, with each arm wrapping around the center nine times. Each of the arms was capped at the periphery with a small, colored sphere, forming a perfect circle of nine stones. A large black stone sphere, highly polished, dominated the innermost part of the spiral.

A thin, silver strip was inset into the plaza, coming to a sharp point at the base of the obelisk. It continued in a straight line toward the edge of the court, growing slowly wider as it passed between the white poles, under the ironwork, and disappeared into the distance. The silvery metal shimmered and glowed with dancing random patterns, obviously the work of Divas.

"What is this 'descension' business? Where is your tower, *Heiligmann*?" Ziegfried was growing impatient.

"The Path is the tower," said the Diva. "Come." It moved in the direction of the white pillars.

"Slow down, there, blinky! I need a top-me-off before we cross over." At this, Nelomar produced a roasted haunch of some herbivore and began to devour it with grotesque efficiency. "Some?" He waved the disgusting meat in Ziegfried's general direction. Irritated, Ziegfried ignored him.

"I hope you brought some walking shoes," chewed Nelomar, mouth wide open. His manners were contemptible. "One does not simply waltz into the Concordant Opposition." Nelomar had finished his snack, and was noisily licking the grease from his fingers. "There we are! Ready, all?"

The group moved onto the silver strip and began their long descension. It was difficult at first, as the silver strip was quite narrow, and they were forced to pass single-file. After a few miles, the strip widened enough to accommodate them comfortably. Here, the Diva paused, grew brighter, and somehow more serious. The patterns in the roadway responded to the Diva, shifting and moving in harmony.

"You must not stray from The Path," the Diva intoned formally. "This universe died long ago, and outward of the regions we have provided for your comfort

there exists a single notion: down. Once you begin to fall, no Diva will aid you, and you will drop through the Ring of Aspects, directly into the singularity. The end of your existence will be complete. Do not stray from The Path." The Diva lessened, and they moved on.

Ziegfried was unmoved by threats. The glimmering thing and the corpulent priest were not only in league they were also clearly insane. As the silver road led them through the fantastic streets of Tanelorn, it remained arrow-straight, and suffered no cross-streets, bridges, rivers, or any obstruction whatsoever. After many hours, the city had thinned to outskirts, and finally to countryside. Ziegfried noticed the sun's position directly overhead remained unchanged. They had not passed a single tower.

After a full day of walking, Ziegfried became aware the sun had moved slightly toward the horizon directly behind them. He cautiously moved toward one margin of the silver strip, which had broadened to tens of feet, and peered over the edge.

They were five feet off the ground.

This absurd view gave Ziegfried some new perspective. While the road was rising, it was doing so at a mind-numbingly slow rate, inching ever higher as the miles wore on. The silver strip disappeared below the horizon with the rest of the planet. It was wafer-thin, with a black and featureless underside. Ziegfried could detect no mechanism that might hold it up.

*"Teufelwerk!"* swore the Old God under his breath.

"I'd get my looks in now, if I were you," cautioned Nelomar. "The drop doesn't get any shallower where we're going."

"How long is this ridiculous road?" asked the god of KAOS. The edge had not impressed him at all.

"Lessee," said Nelomar, taking out a banker's visor, a goose feather, and a papyrus scroll. "If we take into account the spiral pattern," he figured, quickly scratching his quill across the paper, "walking nonstop at 4 miles per hour, add in the hellish gravity, times the circumference, times pi (I prefer apple), integrate over nine wraps, carry the elephant..." Nelomar's concentration was intense.

"The journey down to the Ring of Aspects is 126,922,680 astronomical units, or 2,007 years as the light falls," provided the Diva helpfully.

"Give or take," agreed Nelomar. "We've been walking for over a day already." Nelomar kept the visor for some relief against the harshening sunlight. "We should get there in, oh, 336 billion years. Give or take."

The mortal remnants of Ziegfried's mind were horrified! The sheer boredom alone implied by walking ten more minutes with these, these –

"Hey, now! Let's stay in the lines, shall we?" Ziegfried found himself looking up into the suspiciously merry eyes of Fr. Nelomar. "You turned white as a Diva, and put'near fell into Falling!" The priest helped the wobbly god to his feet.

"Your little jest escapes us," muttered Ziegfried, more than his pride shaken. "Your number-peddling finds no buyers as far as we are concerned. Meaningless *Unsinn* designed to distract us as you walk us to death, a thousand times over!"

"Yes," agreed the Diva. "The numbers have no meaning. Outward of the Sea of Ideas, only Divas, and our Serwyn masters, possess context."

That was not precisely what the Old God had meant, but he was willing to keep his corrections to himself for the moment.

"Well, don't look at me!" cried Nelomar. "I was told there would be no math!"

As the debate continued, they approached the planet's terminator. The silver strip was now at least a hundred feet in width, rising several miles above the surface. Ziegfried realized they had been walking for over two months in what seemed like a few minutes. The sun was setting behind them, and the road became a rippling river of orange, then crimson.

The night that followed was so complete that Ziegfried began to stagger once more. The sky contained no stars, no moons, nor light of any kind. The inky pall engulfed and permeated his being. Reflected in the shimmering light of the silver road, the images of his companions were slightly blurred, as if their very existence were being sucked downward along the preposterous road. He felt every fiber of his immortal self being pulled forward. The feeling he was about to trip and fall was overwhelming. Was there no end to the madness of this terrible place?

As they walked the endless miles, Ziegfried lost all sense of himself and where he was. Time, it seemed, was a bad joke. All that remained was the silver strip, growing ever wider, shimmering dimly in the utter vacancy. At some point, the edges of the road began to crack apart and lose cohesion. Now miles wide, it became a glimmering river that had no upstream. Behind them, the road abruptly ended in nothingness, as even its light must fall.

"This walk is beneath us. Why does *die Schimmernengle* not at least provide us with that glass carriage of hers?" The god of KAOS was not accustomed to walking like a common peasant to market, and his bunions were swollen.

"It," corrected the Diva. "We have no gender as you would reckon. This universe stopped long ago. All motion is an illusion perpetrated by the Serwyn to sustain the Sea of Ideas. Inward of the Divan suns, walking is all the motive force we can provide. Were we to have legs, of course. The Path is for the Membership."

"Now, I'd sooner pass up lunch than complain to a Diva, but I have to agree with the Old Zee, here. This is a heckuva way to run a choo-choo!" Nelomar didn't seem put-out in the slightest.

"You will address us as *Herr* Ziegfried, though I prefer you not address us at all," the deity complained bitterly.

"Your concerns have been noted. Please move along." The Diva was insistent.

"There, you see? Our concerns have been noted. I really don't know what else you expect," admonished Nelomar happily.

Ziegfried sulked, and the walking continued. After several oblivions, many eternities, and uncounted eons, the silver strip had grown to a thousand miles in width. For unknown millennia, visible between the cracks in the road below, was at first a slightly less black patch in the otherwise empty sky beneath them. As they descended, the patch grew larger, a thin line, growing wider by the century. Soon, it was nearly 1,000 miles in width, and after a maddening amount of time, the silver roadway came to rest upon it. A sheer vertical wall, transparent and barely visible, marked the boundary. It was immeasurably high, and at its base were two white poles, between which hung a familiar abstract spiral ironwork. Through the transparency, Ziegfried could see the silver strip continued into the distance.

Here, the Diva paused once again, growing exceedingly bright. "We have arrived at the Ring of Aspects. Once you step onto the Ring, you will not be permitted to leave until you have been purged of any trace of the Flaw. The Committee is not responsible for any collapse in specific viability once the cleansing is complete, and this is not to be taken lightly."

With that, the Diva moved between the poles with Nelmoar right behind it. Seeing no other alternative, Ziegfried swore to himself, and stepped though the portal. Thankfully, his commemorative stein was empty, and his Turkish cigarette had, at last, gone out.

</Gathering Arm>

<Ring of Aspects>

Only the Diva perceived they had walked around the last singularity nine times in an ever-tightening spiral. Not even Nelomar was aware of the true size and scope of the Ring of Aspects. It was formed from the same silvery metal as The Path, and grew into intricate, curving shapes that seemed impossibly delicate, changing form and function as if with some will of its own. It was a ring some 11,000au in diameter, and 1,000 miles in square cross-section. Its outer surface anchored the nine gathering arms, which swept outward toward the Divan suns. The whole of it – suns, planets, arms and ring – was stationary.

The inner face of the ring was an array of uniform transparent compartments, each some 10 miles square, and stacked 99 tall. All told, there were some 31,815,709,200,000 individual chambers. The view from every last one was that of a monster.

As all of the remaining space and time that had once made up this dreadful universe fell into the final singularity, it formed an ever-growing event horizon, that membrane at which even light must utterly succumb to gravitational forces. By the time Ziegfried had arrived, the horizon of the remaining black hole was 10,000au in diameter, and was completely still. In the grand scheme of things, it had stopped rotating shortly after dirt.

Between the Ring and the End of All Things was a swirling mist of color and light some 500au in width. The vapor brushed against the transparent faces of the Ring's chambers, many of which were flashing different colors of their own accord. From the fog arose swirling vortices that penetrated into the depths of many chambers at once. It was called by the Divas the Sea of Ideas, the stuff from which the various aspects of the Multiverse were formed.

Ziegfried saw none of this. Instead, he was swept off his feet, and dragged through an airless space, picking up terrible speed. Below was an incomprehensible grid-like pattern made up of small individual sources of light, all the same uniform shade of orange, with a slightly pink dimension. Other lights, of different colors and shapes, danced and twinkled. He became aware that some of the lights were moving in long, swaying streams. As lights approached him in the flow, they were blue, and as they receded, they became red. None of it made any sense.

Soon, he could see the grid was beginning to slope downward from all directions, leading to a deepening throat that seemed bottomless. The orange lights kept their regular pattern, becoming circles that passed him by at an alarming rate as

he fell. He felt himself being stretched into an impossibly thin strand exactly one atom in width. Just as he was sure he would snap, he felt the cold slap of real air on his face.

He was in free-fall, surrounded by blue sky and clouds. His Turkish cigarette roared to life, burning his fingers, but he somehow managed not to drop it. His commemorative stein began to overflow with suds, leaving a frothy trail behind him as he fell. Far below were a fat white blob and a twinkling light. All were racing downward toward a curious ocean of crystal-clear turquoise water. Through the clouds and mist, Ziegfried could see the sea was bounded on four sides, like a box, by transparent sheets taller than he could reckon; tens of miles, at least. Through the panes, he saw other oceans, but not much else. In the corners, he could barely make out additional chambers beyond, all laid out in a uniform grid. One of the tall sheets was completely black, giving no hint as to what it contained. The sea below had no bottom. The Old God could see lights flashing and dancing beyond the water.

Suddenly, the fat white blob exploded into a plume of pink and lavender, taking a circular shape. Fr. Nelomar shot past him, headed upward as the air caught his durable, yet attractive, parachute. The priest was yelling at him. "Pull the cord! PULL THE CORD!" was all the deity heard. He realized he was wearing a backpack, and dangling in front of him was a rope ending in a red metal loop.

Below, an island became visible, and it was getting larger. At its center was a mountain, and at the summit was a spire. At its tip was a lovely Swiss chateau with a bright sun porch enclosed completely in glass. There seemed to be movement within. He was headed right for it, and the panic swelled inside him. He reached down, grabbed the red ring, and pulled.

Nothing happened. Ziegfried looked up. He was leading a line of soiled underwear, each large enough for three grown men and a bull walrus. By this point, Ziegfried welcomed death, as his fragile sanity had cracked somewhere on the walk down. With a curious tranquility, he awaited the thousands of shards of glass to take him from his misery, when he felt an enormous pull upward.

Fr. Nelomar's unmentionables had been tied together into a broad geodesic shape, catching the wind, and setting the weary god onto one of the chateau's cute little balconies with a feather-soft landing. Nelomar's laundry, centuries undone, buried him in a noisome heap. The fat priest at least had the good grace to dig him out. He was in tears from hysterical laughter. Ziegfried wanted to put his Turkish cigarette out in Nelomar's eye.

"We have arrived," the Diva announced pointlessly. It led them into the interior of the really quaint Swiss chateau.

</Ring of Aspects>

- Part 6 -

<Tanelorn(10,7,2,9,8,4/5,4)>

The glass walls of the bright sun porch rose in four sheets that began to curve inward at twelve feet, and bending upwards towards the center where they met to create a peaked roof. A curious weather vane capped the peak, consisting of a black and white arrow, and swaying lazily in the sea breeze. The view was breathtaking. Rising more than a thousand feet above the summit of the mountain below, the spire that held up the entire house was a thin, white pole. French doors set in one diagonal corner led into the actual house.

An oval table made of oak with a clear stain dominated the center of the porch. It was surrounded by five sturdy wooden chairs, with two on each side, and one at the near end. The far end of the table was masked by a screen made of polished gold that warmly reflected the yellow and tan hues of the table's oaken grains.

Three backlit humanoids were gathered in one corner, talking among themselves, and seeming to enjoy the panorama. Two were very tall, and the third was exceedingly short.

The Diva took its place behind the gold screen, which covered the lower half of its shimmering self. "Please gather," it said in a clear, sensual voice. "For the tournament must soon begin."

As the group of humanoids took their places around the table, Ziegfried was aghast! His mind was having serious trouble comprehending what he was seeing. The short being caused him the least distress. It was potentially male, perhaps three feet tall, and wore a crown of leaves around its head. It had pointed ears, a sharp nose, and large bright blue eyes. Suspended from a gold chain around its neck hung an amber arrow pointing upwards. Dressed in white robes, it possessed a thin white staff with a curious black and white arrow mounted horizontally on its tip. It was pointing at Fr. Nelomar.

"Fr. Freunlaven!" cried Nelomar.

"Fr. Nelomar! Why, I had no idea you would be here!" The two embraced, the tips of their staff-arrows coming together, but not quite touching. The tiny creature then addressed the Old God: "And you must be Ziegfried of KAOS!" Without warning, Freunlaven grabbed and vigorously shook Ziegfried's hand. "I've been a big fan of yours ever since that business with Klink! How is the cripple these days?" His voice was that of an adolescent gopher.

"We do not know," said Ziegfried. His dislike for this tiny creature was intense. "He and 'prince' Lafrom have escaped us. But not for long. *Der Frohträger* claims he has the rod."

"And for his betrayal, I shall eat 'prince' Lafrom quite slowly," growled one of the tall humanoids. Ziegfried was quite sure he did not at all care for this menagerie. It stood some nine feet tall, a feline standing on its hind legs, covered with dark orange fur that surrounded its head with a luxurious fiery mane. Its green-gold eyes were large and intelligent, the eyes of a deadly predator. Its snout was a deep brick red, and the number of razor-sharp teeth jammed into its gaping maw strained credulity. It wore few trappings. A thin leather strip served as a sort of sash, and five gold stars were attached to the strip in a line at the shoulder.

"Eat all you wish. His soul belongs to the Hastrum," sighed the third humanoid. Ziegfried immediately forgot the talking cat. The horror which greeted him was only lessened by the figure's black robes, which thankfully hid most of its undead remains. Thick black gloves covered its hands. In one, it carried a stout iron staff, and on the index finger of the other it wore an iron ring set with a black stone. The stench of rot and death emanated from its cloaked head. "In fact, you will all, in time, meet with the Maker."

"Maker, schmaker," mocked Freunlaven. "I seem recall staring at your Maker, and picking up this dandy pole." He knocked his staff on the floor for emphasis.

"Without the aid of the Bixenta, you are helpless," hissed the undead monster. And when you realize that their support will soon be withdrawn, long shall be your lamentations, as the Hastrum spends the centuries devouring your very being." It then began a fascinating sort of circular swaying motion, while wheezing noisily from under its hood.

"Well, I'm glad to see we're all full of spunk today!" Fr. Nelomar gleefully clapped his hands together. "Should make for a good tourney!"

"Please take your seats," said the Diva. As they took to their chairs, the Diva brightened. "Now come the introductions. Here we have Lord Graffy of Cassinar, General of the Free People's Army, and Emperor of Ard-Maroth." The giant cat stood, and bowed solemnly before the group.

"Next, I give you Lord Abear the Eternal, Orbane of Asylum, and the Utter Disembodiment of the Hastrum." The black-clad terror rose and pointed its ringed finger directly at Freunlaven for a moment, and then pointed it straight down. It sat without a word, though the rotating and wheezing continued.

"Our guest of honor for this event is *Herr* Ziegfried of KAOS, whom all of you know as the greater god whose worshippers contrived the most recent aspect of the Flaw."

Ziegfried had arrived at a complete lack of words. Most of what he had heard was gibberish, and being referred to as a flaw to his face only deepened his dismay. He did not know these entities, as they seemed to know him. Lafrom certainly never spoke of talking *grosskatzen*, nor of the walking dead. Of Freunlaven he had heard only rumor, most of which he could not recall. He rose to his feet, and said "*Guten Tag*." He sat down quickly, praying it would be enough for the Diva.

Thankfully, it was. The Diva continued around the table: "The Bixenta are kind enough to share with us perhaps the most outstanding of the Fathers of the Fields, Fr. Nelomar, considered wise among the Divas, and even by our Serwyn masters."

Fr. Nelomar, blushing profusely, rose to his feet, warmly responding to the Diva, "And it is my distinct pleasure to attend a tournament conducted by such auspicious folk as the Divas, whose hospitality is only exceeded by the brightness of their shine." Ziegfried felt nauseated.

"And last," said the Diva, "I give you Fr. Freunlaven, Avatar of Donblas the Justicemaker, Archbishop of Tolerien, and Adjunct to the Bixenta Fatherhood."

"And I thank the right-honorable glow-bug to my left. Gentlemen, Felines, Twinkles and Abominations, my remarks will be brief," declared Freunlaven, unrolling a scroll at least ten feet in length. "First, I would like to thank, well, myself, of course, and all I have accomplished. Since the beginning of Time, I –"

There was an orange blur, and most of the scroll dropped to the floor. The sleeves of Freunlaven's robes peeled back like twin bananas, and his wrists had been sliced open just deep enough to draw blood. Lord Graffy licked one of his claws noisily, staring directly at the diminutive elf.

"We'll get to the rest later!" said Freunlaven, sitting quickly back into his chair. Ziegfried was developing a respect for the cat that had been called Emperor. He noticed an odd black sphere, highly polished, placed before him on the table. At first, he mistook it for a billiard ball, as there was a white circle containing a black "8" painted onto the sphere. But it was far too big for any billiard table, and it rested on a flat side. Like everything else he had encountered since his existence was rudely interrupted by that duplicitous Diva, it possessed no meaning whatsoever.

"The Membership," intoned the Diva formally, "having been declared, shall turn its attention to the matter at hand, that of the manifest Flaw, and what now must be done. It is in that spirit I welcome you all to the Tournament at Tanelorn, of ten, seven, two, nine, eight, four (often five), four."

The room darkened. All that remained was the pillar of shimmering Divan light.

"Tournament Rules," declared the Diva.

</Tanelorn(10,7,2,9,8,4/5,4)>

<Tournament Rules>

Three of the four glass walls of the recently bright sun porch suddenly came to life with images. Behind the Diva was a scene from just inside a large cave. Here, three humanoids were poised over the remains of a fourth. The details were blurred, as though the glass were old and imperfect.

The opposite wall, behind Ziegfred, showed scenes of a group of humanoids gathered around a table, with a twinkling light at one end. At first, it appeared as though the glass had become a warped mirror. But Ziegfried could soon tell it was an entirely different party. He could not make out anything significant.

The third wall, behind the two priests, showed the bridge of a large white ocean-going ship, with humanoids moving in an odd rhythm as they tended to their duties. They seemed to be dressed all in white, with round, flat white hats, but no further details were discernable through the murky glass.

Behind Lords Abear and Graffy the wall was completely black, and utterly devoid of features.

"Long ago," began the Diva formally. "When this universe was but a twinkle in the eye of its progenitor, the Serwyn were already old. They dwell on the far shores of the Sea of Ideas, nigh to the singularity, where they mine particles of luminance. For the Serwyn know the three secrets of light: frequency, trajectory, and origin. Further, by interacting with photons of light, the Serwyn perceive all incidents the light has taken on its journey across the Multiverse. Here, at the center, all light in the Multiverse eventually falls, and embedded within it lies both all of recorded history, and all potential futures. They all occur at once."

Fr. Freunlaven made a long, low whistling sound. "We should ask the Serwyn what happened to Abear's personality." The undead horror hissed, and began to rotate somewhat faster.

"Indeed," agreed the Diva. "All information that ever was, is, and ever could be is embedded within the photonic flow. The Serwyn created the Divas to mediate the meaning of the light through four- (often five-) dimensional representations realized through the tournament. When the Flaw is uncovered, the Serwyn dispose of it by releasing the underlying photons into the singularity. As the event horizon exists in all frames of reference, the realignment is complete, and the Flaw is reduced. Only when the Flaw has been removed will the Ones Who Came Before return."

"Do you mean to tell me," growled Lord Graffy, "that the future of all existence hinges upon a child's pretend-time?"

"Only if the Emperor of Ard-Maroth considers himself a kitten," answered the Diva. "For he will have his part in determining where lies the Flaw before this tournament is concluded."

Abear's rasping chuckle had all the humor of a slaughterhouse. "In the Dark of the Maker-stone, all flaws are revealed. My own ascension proves perfection." His cycle of rotation slowed, and his wheezing deepened.

"*Herr Ziegfried,*" announced the Diva. "As this is your first tournament, you will roll the fate of the Membership, as required. By rule, all actions are segmented, and all events are said to occur simultaneously. The round begins with Lord Graffy, and ends with Fr. Freunlaven. Tell us, Great God of KAOS, how many rounds is this tournament?"

Ziegfried looked blankly at the Diva, unable to comprehend the question. At his age, wetting his pants was an afterthought. He looked at Fr. Nelomar, hoping the priest would detect the panic in the Old God's eyes.

"Pick up the 8-ball, and give us a shaky!" encouraged Nelomar. Ziegfried was relieved. Another small victory. He picked up the strange black sphere, and shook it.

"Now turn it over, and let's have it!" Nelomar was clearly excited.

The ball appeared to be filled with fluid. A round window embedded within the ball's flat side showed a die of an unknown number of sides, each with a triangular face. The die turned and floated before placing one of its faces against the window.

"*Drei,*" said Ziegfried. "It reads 'three'."

"How fitting," reflected Freunlaven. "One for each toot on the Horn of Fate."

"Oh, we are *not* going after that creature again!" fumed Graffy.

"No," agreed the Diva, "we are not. This is an Aspect Tournament. We deal in ideas, not actualities. All facts in this universe were forgotten long ago. The roll was for three rounds, and that is exactly what we shall have."

"Is there a washroom in the main house?" asked Ziegfried. Escape may still be possible. "We should like to refresh ourselves."

Fr. Nelomar laid his hand upon the Old God's arm. "That urge to go must be just awful at your age. Let's just empty that old bladder...there!" Ziegfreid's desire to strike him was never more powerful than in that moment.

"The tournament has already begun. We shall be done soon enough," stated the Diva.

"Cheer up, Old Man!" said Nelomar. "You can't die, if that's what you're worried about. Did you forget you're immortal?"

"We have forgotten nothing," Ziegfried said, defending what little of his pride remained. "And we remain unmoved by your childish games here today. *Feindlicht!* We demand to see the rod-bearer!"

"Then let us begin," suggested the Diva. "Any Member may interrupt the round by declaring a point of order. All knowable answers will be provided at that time. Are there any questions? None? Very well."

"Round One", the Diva stated.

</Tournament Rules>

<Round One>

The Diva grew bright, and began to twinkle with pastel colors of a million shades. "You were all specifically chosen for this tournament, as you represent a complete spectrum of deific experience, from the eldest, Fr. Nelomar, down to Ziegfried, who is without his Talisman." There was some muted chuckling at this. Ziegfried disliked them all.

"As such," continued the Diva, "you serve as an Aspect of Peers, those qualified to make certain decisions regarding the existence of the Flaw. Ziegfried's missing Talisman, the Serwyn contend, is the final aspect of the Flaw in this Multiverse. Only fully assembled can it be returned to the singularity."

"Lord Graffy, the round is yours." The Diva's brightness lessened, though the soft colored lights remained.

"POO." The giant cat stood up. "How long will this tournament last?" Graffy's tail was a frantic whip of agitation.

"The point of order is recognized," said the Diva. "Barring unforeseen circumstances, you will return to Ard-Maroth 33 years from the time you left the wide plains of your homeland. Round action continues."

"Then my action is to secure the Free Peoples. They are to abandon all settlements, break all communities, and gather in groups of no more than two or three. They are to melt into the wilderness where no mass-murder can occur. The slaughter ends now." The Emporer of Ard-Maroth took his seat.

"Very well," said the Diva. "Abear, to you."

"Lord Graffy may well rule the Keeplands," whispered Abear, "but he cannot control the Hastrum. His counsel is nevertheless sound. Who leads the Hastrum in my absence?"

"As the Gilgolin Council was retired, and none of the Orbane are qualified, ancient treaty calls for the Hastrum to come under the protection of the next eldest surviving clan leader. Your people are now under the temporary rule of Morgan Diliassiter of the Absanon for next 33 years."

Abear shrieked, and stood up. The awful wail sent a thousand spiders crawling up Ziegfried's spine. Lord Abear, trembling visibly, pointed its iron staff at the Diva. "You will return me at once!"

"Impossible, as you know. Your actions still have context. The Hastrum have hidden themselves, and the Maker-stone. The round now goes to Ziegfried."

Abear reluctantly returned to its seat. A sort of gurgling moan now accompanied its rotating.

Ziegfried was beginning to see a pattern. Actions, it seemed, were carried out simply by saying them aloud, regardless of their complexity or intent. All obeyed the Diva without question. He needed more information. "Point of order, if you please," he began. "Lord Graffy, how many call themselves your subjects?"

"The point of order is recognized," declared the Diva.

"None," said Graffy. "Those I name as my subjects are every rock, tree, and prey in what is known as Old Tolerien, along with certain territories in Eros, and the ruins of Arcanthea. As such, they go without counting. Humanoid populations run into the tens of millions." The Emperor of Ard-Maroth was indeed great. Ziegfried must assume the others were as well, or they would not be here.

And that made them all exceedingly dangerous.

"Indeed," said Ziegfried. "If we are a deity, then we have worshippers. We are going to attempt to contact Ernst Klink."

At this, Fr. Freunlaven took out a pen and began to scribble madly on the remains of his scroll. Fr. Nelomar leaned over to Ziegfried, and whispered "Well done, Old Boy."

"Round action," intoned the Diva. "You see a wide, desolate desert plain, broken by a single large mountain. On the plain is a collection of tents, a settlement of humans numbering in the thousands, though they are clearly nomadic. One is very old, and confined to a wheelchair. He is being pushed among the tents by an unseen attendant. It can only be Ernst Klink, but his mind is unreachable, and you cannot tell why. You sense he has been warped, and not by physical malady. He has seen something he would rather not have. The vision fades."

Ziegfried found himself clutching his chest and gasping for breath. He was about to pass out. The Diva continued, ignoring him. "Your action, Fr. Nelomar?"

"I will use my turn to heal 'is nibs here," said Nelomar, laying hands on Ziegfried, and bringing him out of his conniption fit.

"We had assumed," coughed the Old God, "that all actions were carried out, not actually experienced."

"That's what you get for not having a Talisman!" chided Fr. Freenlaven. He tore a piece from his scroll, balled it up, and threw it into the Diva with a shout of "Incoming!"

"I am quite certain," rumbled the giant feline, "that note-passing is not permitted."

"You're living in the past, man!" laughed Freenlaven. "Like, I already threw it?"

"Fr. Freenlaven is recognized, and his action is valid," proclaimed the Diva. "It is done."

There was a sort of liquid "ploop!" sound from the black, featureless pane. It was rippling in response to the emergence of a wheelchair followed closely by its attendant.

The man in the wheelchair was clad in a black leather military-style dress uniform, with a wide, circular officer's hat. Both hands were covered by smart leather gloves, also black. He wore a pair of knee-high polished leather boots on his useless legs. He was stiff, and listed somewhat to port. His dark sunglasses hid his eyes, and his mouth was slack-jawed. "I am unaware of the time," he said in a rich baritone, thick with Prussian.

"Well, I'll be dipped in shit and rolled in flies!" exclaimed his nurse. "Ziegfried! Is it really you? We've been looking all over for you! You do not want to know where we've been! Maybe you do? Who knows!" He threw his head back and laughed hysterically. "Who cares? I have the rod!"

"In case it was not clear before," said Lord Graffy to Fr. Freenlaven, "I have never liked you."

"Round Two," said the Diva.

</Round One>

<Round Two>

"Prince" Lafrom was not himself. His tall, broad frame was beyond lean, well into scrawny, and teetering on the brink of skeletal. His luxurious black hair was matted into greasy tangles, and whole patches were missing. What remained of his royal robes were pieces of fabric that had been ground into the dozens of wounds all over his filthy milk-white body. His eyes were large and round, the color of the sea, wild, and completely insane. His face was a grinning mask of cracked, yellow, and mostly missing teeth. "Who's winning?" he asked cheerfully. His voice was melodious and clear.

"The worshippers will please take their places of respect to their deity," the Diva said politely.

"Will do, Chief!" said Lafrom, using his outside voice. He pushed the crippled Klink to a position behind Ziegfried. Lafrom smelled of unwashed bodies and feces, though it was a welcome interruption from Lord Abear's emanations. Ziegfried could detect no sign of the rod.

"The ambient temperature is too low," muttered Klink.

"Shhhh! Quiet you!" commanded Lafrom. "I said I'd get you a blanket!"

"Tournament Rules," reminded the Diva, rather loudly.

"Don't mind us! Though would it kill you to get us a drink?" cried Lafrom.

"I am unaware of the time, and the ambient temperature is too low," complained Klink. He seemed inconsolable.

"The round returns to Lord Graffy," declared the Diva.

There was motion, too fast for Ziegfried to comprehend. By the time he was aware of what had happened, Graffy had moved around the table to assault "prince" Lafrom, who was now dangling by his left foot, his face level with the great cat's maw of gnashing death. Abear, in turn, had taken a defensive position in front of the great cat, his iron staff held such that none may interfere with the judgment of the Emperor of Ard-Maroth.

"Heeeeeeyyy," said Lafrom through his unchanging smile, "is this any way to treat royalty?"

"*Herr Ziegfried*," said the Diva. "The round is yours."

"Very well," said Ziegfried. Providence seemed to be shifting his way for the moment, forgetting he was himself a source of divine intervention. He turned his attention to Klink. "We will question *das arme Luder*." He grabbed Klink by the lapels and shook him vigorously. "This is KAOS! We do not mutter here! You will tell us where lies this Ahnkmog? We know where you live!" He then backhanded the poor wretch with unnecessary violence.

"I require tea, and I am unaware of the time," said Klink, oblivious.

"Oh, will you please just get him some bloody tea and a bloody clock already? I am sick of listening to it!" complained Lafrom.

"As you reach out with your mind," the Diva said to Ziegfried, "it meets a blank wall. The best example is yonder aspect boundary, from which 'prince' Lafrom and *Herr Klink* emerged. Fr. Nelomar, your action."

Ziegfried grew angry. He had wasted his turn. He should have demanded the rod, and escaped this nightmare. He had one chance remaining.

Fr. Nelomar went over to the crippled priest of KAOS, removed his sunglasses, and laid hands upon him. Almost immediately he said, "Well, that's it. He's got The Stars in his eyes. I can't do anything for him." Nelomar returned to his seat.

"*Gebabbel!*" declared Ziegfried. "One would expect a certain adoration upon meeting one's god-head. His stubborn will is an iron wall. He will come out of it, we assure you."

"No, you don't understand," said Nelomar. "He's got the stars in his eyes. All of them, from what I can tell. He wasn't designed to hold all the stars, see. Imagine stuffing ten pounds of manure into a five pound bag. Poor devil. He never had a chance."

"The ambient temperature is too low," muttered Klink.

Ziegfried examined his high priest for himself. His eyes were completely black, pupil, iris and sclera. In this field of darkness Ziegfried could make out a few stars, then a multitude of stars, then whole galaxies full of stars. The eyes of Ernst Klink grew large, and Ziegfried could see whole universes, an infinity of creation. He felt himself floating into the grandness of it all –

He then felt a sharp pain in his back, and went flying face-first into the floor. Lord Abear was standing over him with his staff extended. It was hissing some

curse at him, while Fr. Nelomar helped him up. "I wouldn't look too deep, or you'll have all the stars in your eyes, too," cautioned Fr. Nelomar.

"Lord Abear," said the Diva. "Your action is out of order. By rule, you will forfeit your next turn." Ziegfried was at a complete loss as to why this hooded nightmare would interrupt his fall into the oblivion behind Klink's eyes.

"So be it," whispered Abear. It remained at full attention, guarding the Emperor and his hanging prey. It ignored Ziegfried.

"Fr. Freunlaven, the round turns to you."

The tiny priest was grinning from ear to ear as he wrote another note, crushed it into a ball, and threw it at the Diva. The Diva paused for a few moments, and then suddenly broke into a fit of multi-colored twinkling, a Christmas tree gone mad. "*Herr* Ziegfried," it said at last. Its voice betrayed none of the mesmerizing patterns that were coursing through it. "The Membership requires you to roll their fate."

"Oh, goodie!" laughed Lafrom.

"Is this really necessary?" groused Ziegfried. "We waste time."

"It is required. The Serwyn lack this event in their survey. Please roll for the Membership."

With an impatient sigh, Ziegfried once again took up the black sphere, shook it vigorously, and peered into the window. The die floated around for some time before coming to rest.

"*Neunzhen*," said Ziegfried. He could not comprehend how this ludicrous device could possibly control the future.

"HA!" declared Freunlaven triumphantly. Nelomar whistled appreciatively.

"The nineteen is recorded," the Diva stated. "The summons is complete."

Lafrom began to howl, and he covered both ears with his hands. Klink went into convulsions, slipping out of his wheelchair, and onto the floor.

Ziegfried's Turkish cigarette went up in a large flame, and his commemorative stein fell to the floor and shattered, spilling black rancid ale around the whole room. He felt a large weight in his left hand, which now grasped a black wooden rod. It was frigidly cold, and a gray mist hung around it. It was capped with a

silvery sphere some seven inches in diameter, and this rested on a cup carved into the piece just below it. The rod was 49 inches long, and narrowed to a tip where three carved iron claws held a small crystal sphere in place. There were six black iron bands incised with red runes along the rod's length. Directly below each band was a lump of purplish crystal that seemed to ooze from the cracks between band and wood. Four blackish-purple bat wings, made of carved iron, were arrayed around the silver sphere. They seemed to be flapping.

Other events were occurring simultaneously. In the image behind the Diva, the humanoids were buried as their cave collapsed, leaving a scene of rocks and dirt. The wall behind Nelomar and Freunlaven shattered, showing the bow of a large white ship. It parted the water in twin white walls of water and foam. It was headed directly for the sun porch, its ocean somehow level with the floor of house.

Behind Ziegfried, the wall did not shatter, but the image resolved into a something the Old God recognized from his earliest years: the set of a movie production. The twinkling light became the director, and the other figures became actors and crew. It was some science fiction epic, and Ziegfried thought he might recognize some of the talent. In fact, the director could have been Klink's twin. They seemed to be unaware of Ziegfried and his group.

"Round three," announced the Diva.

</Round Two>

<Round Three>

Lafrom's baneful wailing continued. Graffy swatted his head with an open paw, and the dirty "prince" made a sort of squawk, falling mercifully silent. The white ship was now very close, and getting larger by the minute. The spray of from the sea began to wash into the room.

"Lord Graffy, the final round turns to you," said the Diva, still a kaleidoscope of colored patterns.

"POO. What chamber lies beyond the black pane?" the great cat motioned.

"Jerusalem(6,6,6,7,4/40,1000,-1)" informed the Diva helpfully.

"Meaningless!" growled Lord Graffy. "My action is to interrogate this wretched prey under the full authority of my office."

"The worshipper will answer all questions put to it by the Emperor of Ard-Maroth," the Diva said formally.

"Did you drop the rod in the Jerusalem realm? Why?" demanded the great cat. His tail slashed at the air from every direction.

"Oh, that's easy!" said Lafrom, clearly enjoying himself. "To be rid of it!" At this, Graffy put Lafrom back on his feet, but kept a heavy hand on his shoulder. The Emperor's claws extended half way down Lafrom's back.

"You will explain," he rumbled.

"Well, we were being chased, which wasn't unusual. Everyone wants the rod, and why not? It chose me, and that's all that matters. We were having such fun! Then WHAM! We end up in this desert, and I mean it's hot! I tried to ditch Klink, but we're bound, it seems, the big lug!" At this, he reached over to give Klink a playful whack across the face.

The High Priest of KAOS was twisted rather pretzel-like on the floor, twitching slightly. "I am unaware of the time," he murmured blankly.

"So after wandering around for weeks, we came across this tent village. They were waiting for their leader to return. He'd gone up the mountain on some holy quest, and hadn't been heard from in months. The rod said it liked these folks, so we hunkered down. They were quite a sterile bunch of folks, fleeing some

slave master, and wandering around this awful desert. The rod said to have them gather up all the gold, so they did. Hell, they liked the stuff as much as me!”

“You will now come to the point,” Graffy warned dangerously.

“Long story short,” continued Lafrom, “they made statues into shapes the rod found favorable, and when the old man returned, boy, was he pissed! He had these two glowing gold tablets, and as soon as he saw us, he ordered his men to imprison us. Heretics, they called us! I called upon the rod, but it was busy, as it gets sometimes.”

“This isn’t the first time the rod has betrayed you, is it?” asked Nelomar, clearly saddened by what he had heard.

“I SAID IT WAS BUSY,” stated Lafrom slowly between clenched teeth. A crack appeared in his mask of ever-mirth. It faded quickly. “Anyhoo, we decide it’s time for us to move on, and the old guy’s men give chase. We hid in this big tent, which had a smaller tent inside. What did they call it? The tabermuckle? Taberschmackle? Something like that. Inside the small tent was this glowing gold box with a fancy lid. It had two angels on top, facing each other. They would fetch such a fine price! We could hear the men outside, so we pulled the lid off the box, and I threw in the rod. Getting Klink into that thing was among my most heroic deeds! Finally, I jumped in, and here we are!”

“Why did the rod miss the crossing with you?” demanded the Emperor.

“It was not invited to this tournament,” explained the Diva. “The interrogation is complete. Lord Abear forfeits his turn, and the round now falls to *Herr Ziegfried*.” Lord Graffy pinched Lafrom’s neck, let him drop to the floor, and the mad “prince” did not move again.

All eyes now turned to the Great God of KAOS. He felt the tension around the room, and found himself completely immersed in it. Of his companions he began to see that amid their biting commentary and clear disdain for one another, they were all intimately connected by shared experiences. They seem unconcerned with consequence, living totally in the moment. It imparted to them a terrible wisdom. The great white ship, now just hundreds of yards away and coming on fast, went unnoticed.

“I have complete faith in you, my boy!” said Fr. Nelomar, his fat face shining.

In that moment, as if taken by some unknown spirit, Ziegfried became filled with a creative force he had never experienced before. As raw expectation hung in

the air, the Old God laid down his governance of KAOS, held aloft the rod, and cried in a clear voice that rang out across the spheres of the Multiverse:

"We claim this rod called Ahnkmog as our own, and we will use it to found an Order worthy of worship by All." He was utterly triumphant.

"Oh, crap," muttered Fr. Freunlaven.

"Humans!" spat Lord Graffy.

"Excellent," hissed Lord Abear.

Fr. Nelomar giggled helplessly. "Oh, this should be good!" he said between chuckles.

"The ambient temperature is too low," interjected Klink to no one. Lafrom lay unconscious beside him.

"So be it," declared the Diva. "Ahnkmog resists. You must roll the struggle, *Herr* Ziegfried, for the Membership."

Ziegfried was unnerved by the reaction from his associates. Perhaps he had misread them, though Nelomar was clearly enjoying himself. Abear's support continued to trouble him. He grabbed the black sphere, beginning to appreciate its power, and shook it with purpose. The die rolled and tossed, finally pressing one of its triangular faces against the round window.

"*Eins*," said Ziegfried. "Is that good?"

</Round Three>

<Fumble>

In truth, Ziegfried's 8-ball contained a die with exactly twenty sides. And while a roll can have many meanings depending on the context of the tournament, rolling *die Eins* in a clutch situation is generally deeply frowned upon. For the Serwyn long ago determined that for those with god-like powers there exists an average five percent chance of causing Significant Trouble whenever such-said powers are executed at tournament.

"The fumble is recorded," said the Diva. It had returned to its natural pillar of white shimmering light.

"Well, on that note," said Fr. Nelomar suddenly. "And I'm sure the good Fr. Freunlaven would agree with me on this – it's time to be going. Been a real pleasure, all! Until the next tourney! Come, my Runtling!"

"My! Yes, look at the time!" agreed Freunlaven. The two Fathers linked arms, and the arrows at the tips of their staves began to rotate, growing ever faster until they lofted the pair into the air, and out the shattered window. They just missed the huge white ship, passed into the open sky, and were gone.

"What is happening?" demanded Ziegfried. He was ignored.

"We must also depart," declared Graffy. "Lord Abear shall always find a home within my lands until it kills or injures even one of my subjects."

"Today you are Emperor," hissed Lord Abear bitterly. "Tomorrow, your royal bones shall be dust, and I will remain. I accept your terms."

"Thank you, great Diva. It was a fitting tournament." The Emperor of Ard-Maroth and Lord Abear the Eternal then faded from existence.

"Farewell, Great God of KAOS! You played well!" congratulated the Diva, whereupon it extinguished itself, and was gone.

"*Erwarten!*" shouted Ziegfried. "Why is everyone leaving? We haven't finished the –"

He was interrupted by the bow of the great white ship as it crashed into the sun porch. It knifed its way through the oak table, and came to a stop an inch from the Old God's nose. Seawater was pouring in, swamping the bodies of Klink and "prince" Lafrom.

Leaning over the side of the ship, Ziegfried saw a horror! He was staring at himself, but where his uniform was black, this imposter's was snow white. And he was wearing shorts! The indignity! He wore a round white officer's hat as though he were somehow important. The name of the ship appeared in large blue letters on the bow: *Pacific Princess*.

The man on the ship turned to some unseen crewmembers. "I see three men! Two are injured. Get some stretchers! And hurry! The 10:30 buffet is about to begin!" The man turned back to face him. "Stay put, we're coming to help you! Hey, you look just like me! I'm Dr. Adam Bricker, ship's Medical Officer! Don't move! You may be seriously injured, and you could miss the Fiesta Ball tonight! Say, are you single?"

Ziegfried did not have time to consider this complete gibberish. The weight of the huge ship was too much for the slender white pole that supported the cute Swiss chalet, and it snapped. As Ziegfried began to fall, he heard the call of "Full astern!" from the ship above, and it disappeared back into its own realm. As he picked up speed, Ziegfried heard the rod crack six times, and come apart into seven pieces, each of which melted into nothingness. Now liberated, the four bat wings flew away into the growing multi-colored fog. Ernst Klink and "prince" Lafrom were falling with him, though they were slowly dissolving into a gray mist before his eyes. He immediately forgot about them as his velocity approached the speed of light, and he became himself luminance. The mountain, the ocean, and the Great Old God of KAOS were then ejected into Sea of Ideas to one day be cleansed of the Flaw by the Serwyn.

But that day is not today.

</Fumble>

The End

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